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Review of H.A.S. Johnston, *A Selection of Hausa Stories*

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Review of H.A.S. Johnston, *A Selection of Hausa Stories*

Abstract

Folklorists should have special interest in this volume. The Hausa people comprise one of the largest tribes in West Africa, located in present day Northern Nigeria and the adjoining parts of the Republic of Niger. Their contact with the Islamic tradition, their pursuit of trade and travel and the wide currency of their language, a true *lingua franca* around Hausaland, are all factors which contribute to the special significance of Hausa oral tradition. It blends indigenous African elements with Islamic themes, and serves as a meeting point for narratives of several West African tribes.

Disciplines

African History | African Languages and Societies | Cultural History | Folklore | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Oral History

Gestalt der Sagen, deutet Sageninhalte aus den Beziehungen der Bergleute zur Umwelt, die mancherorts und zu manchen Zeiten recht gespannt waren, erklärt die Unterschiede zwischen Erz- und Kohlenbergleuten und west- und ostdeutschen Bergarbeitern im Verhältnis zur Sage.

Der größte Teil der Einleitung gibt jedoch Längsschnitte durch einige Themenkreise der Kollektion: Heilfurth geht u. a. auf die Erzählungen vom Engel als Retter Verschütteter ein, auf die Bergwerksheiligen, deutet Gemeinsamkeiten und Unterschiede zwischen evangelischen und katholischen Bergleuten; seine weitreichenden Forschungen ermöglichen es ihm, Beziehungen zwischen bildender Kunst und Sagen Themen aufzuhellen.

Zentrales Thema der Einführung ist allerdings die Entwicklung der Sagen von Untertagegeistern. Hier ist es das unbestreitbare Verdienst des Autors, in die Flut alter Schriften endlich einmal eine exakte Reihenfolge gebracht zu haben; er erkennt Georg Agricola als den frühesten und einzig authentischen Berichterstatter. Das Gewirr der von Agricola abhängigen Schriften war bisher kaum zu durchschauen.

Heilfurth begnügt sich jedoch nicht mit einer Darstellung der Erscheinungsform und des Wesens der Grubengeister, wie sie durch die Jahrhunderte in der Literatur beschrieben wurden, sondern er verfolgt die Einstellung der älteren Autoren zu diesem Problem: wie die Jenseitigen in zunehmendem Maße verteufelt wurden oder Paracelsus sie eigenwillig als „Blüten der Elemente“ verstand, wie ihr Vorhandensein in der Sekundärliteratur allmählich bezweifelt, der Glaube ironisiert wurde. Der Autor geht der Vorstellung von Untertagegeistern bis in die neuesten Ausmündungen ins Pädagogisch-Moralische, ins Ironisch-Humorvolle und ins Spielerische nach.

Für den Bereich des Glaubens an den „daemon metallicus“ und der „virunculi montani“ dürfte Klarheit geschaffen sein; zu den Problemen Rübezahl, Zwerg- und Berggeistsage und Venediger wird der Untersuchungsband Stellung nehmen.

Braunschweig

Peter Wolfersdorf

Johnston, H. A. S. *A Selection of Hausa Stories*, Oxford Library of African Literature, Oxford; The Clarendon Press, 1966. P. 241.

Folklorists should have special interest in this volume. The Hausa people comprise one of the largest tribes in West Africa, located in present day Northern Nigeria and the adjoining parts of the Republic of Niger. Their contact with the Islamic tradition, their pursuit of trade and travel and the wide currency of their language, a true *lingua franca* around Hausaland, are all factors which contribute to the special significance of Hausa oral tradition. It blends indigenous African elements with Islamic themes, and serves as a meeting point for narratives of several West African tribes.

The systematic recording of Hausa stories was started at the beginning of the twentieth century by John Alder Burdon and Frank Edgar. They were officers in the colonial administration of Nigeria who had great interest in local traditions and cultures and were concerned with the preservation of the rich Hausa oral literature. For that purpose they employed local *mallams*, religious teachers, to write down the traditional narratives and historical legends of their tribe. This project resulted in a large bulk of manuscripts, part of which was published in Frank Edgar's, *Litafi na Tatsuniyoyi na Hausa*, 3 vols. (Belfast, 1911—1913) and C. E. J. Whitting's, *Hausa and Fulani Proverbs*, (Lagos, 1940). These collections are probably the largest repository of folktales to be found in any African language. However, since they had not previously been translated into any European language, they remained only little known. The present book purports to expose at least a selection of this body of tradition to a wider audience of those who cannot avail themselves of the original Hausa. In that respect, this is an important contribution to the study of African literature in general and Hausa tradition in particular.

A Selection of Hausa Stories includes a general introduction which provides background information about the Hausa people and their language, history, political organization and folklore. The texts themselves are classified into six groups. The first includes Animal Tales, in which three different trickster types figure prominently: Spider (tales Nos. 4–11); Jackal (tales Nos. 12–16) and Rabbit (tales Nos. 17–18). The second the Fairy Tales, which consists mainly of Märchen type stories. Third is a section of Proverbs and Aphorisms and, fourthly, Historical Legends and Fragments. These are mainly narratives about personalities which figured in the migrations and wars of the Hausa people in ancient and more recent times. Most of the True Stories, the fifth group, are eyewitness accounts about the contacts with the British expeditions at the turn of the century. The sixth and last section, Fiction, contains novella type folktales, which sometimes treat the romantic theme rather humorously. This classification of the stories is quite successful; however, there is no indication as to whether it is based upon the author's own scheme, or cultural criteria and terminology.

Unfortunately, this important publication does not meet the standards of folklore scholarship. The most glaring error is the author's practice of abridging his tales in some cases and producing composite versions in others (see tales Nos. 4, 7, 14, 19, 24, 25, 31, 44, 46, 47, 48, 62, 84). Like nineteenth century scholars, Johnston amends some of the native texts, perhaps with the hope of producing better versions than the informants themselves did. Moreover, he makes a literary principle out of this practice: "The compiler does not feel called upon to apologize for this rough carpentry because, as has already been emphasized, these stories have no authorized versions and the Hausa story-tellers often took similar liberties and provided audiences with their own variations on traditional themes." (p. 43). It is high time that scholars respect the literary ability of traditional informants and do not attempt to improve upon them, adapting the native literature to their European or learned taste. One would expect that this particular method used by popularizers and authors of children's books would have been abandoned by scholars or at least would not find its way into such a serious series as The Oxford Library of African Literature.

There are a few attempts in the book to theorize about the history of the tales. Occasionally Johnston devotes a sentence or two in the footnotes suggesting a literary chronology of Hausa oral literature. Accordingly, a "harsh moral" (p. 49). and "little compassion for physical infirmity" (p. 175) together with denigration of women (see p. 71) are all marks of earlier literary strata. By contrast, a tale in which "women have all the nous" is comparatively modern (p. 92). No doubt the reconstruction of the history of African literature could be a commendable enterprise which might cast light upon various facets of African traditions and their history. However, it must be founded upon documented or critically evaluated evidence. It cannot be solved by casual remarks based upon the untested and biased assumption that oral literature develops from crudity to refinement.

Finally, it is quite unfortunate that Johnston has not familiarized himself with folkloristic research tools and methods. Comparative notes, for example, would have enhanced the collection, and identification of tale types would have increased the value of this work. As it is, he merely notes sporadically and unsystematically that there are many parallels between Hausa stories and folktales of the ancient world and Europe. This contention is correct. For example, tale No. 1 is Type 92 "Lion Dives for His Own Reflection", tale No. 2 is Type 222 "War of Birds and Quadrupeds", tale No. 39 is Type 899 "Alcestis", and tale 83 is Type 882 "The Wager on the Wife's Chastity." And this is just a fraction of the easily identifiable tales.

The extent of African parallels to well-known tale types, which has been uncovered by recent research, requires the rethinking of some of the accepted conventions in the geographic history of folktales. As Stith Thompson outlined it, folktales spread along a geographical continuum from India to Ireland. This view is partially an extension of nineteenth century theories about the relationship between European

and Indian traditions and is partially based upon laborious research which resulted in many monographs about the geographic history of individual tales. Whenever these studies were concerned with early periods, they had to rely upon literary works to reflect the existence of tales in oral circulation. As a result of this method of ersatz documentation, we obtained a distorted view of the routes of diffusion of tradition. The maps of transmission of tales have rarely outlined any paths through sub-Saharan Africa. However, this geographic area was not isolated from either the East or the West. Trade, migrations and wars, before, during and after the Middle Ages, affected the interchange of oral tradition between Africa and its neighboring continents, as much as that of Europe. The Hausa narratives are probably an excellent example of this blend of traditions, and the great number of internationally known tale types in their literature attests to these contacts.

A proper study and editing of African folktales collections will eventually lead to remapping the routes of diffusion of tales and would help us in reconstructing the historical contacts between Africa, Europe and Asia. The present volume does not meet this need.

Philadelphia

Dan Ben-Amos

Karlinger, Felix und Bohdan Mykytiuk: *Legendenmärchen aus Europa*. Hrg. von —. (Die Märchen der Weltliteratur. Begründet von Friedrich von der Leyen. Hrg. von Kurt Schier und Felix Karlinger.) 1. Aufl., Düsseldorf—Köln, Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1967. 312 pp.

Im Titel der Sammlung sind zwei verschiedene Gattungsbezeichnungen miteinander verbunden, wobei die Betonung auf der Legende liegt. Das „Legendenmärchen“, dem Namen nach zwischen den Gattungen stehend, müßte eigentlich Wesensmerkmale aus beiden aufweisen, wobei die Form des Märchens durch Elemente der Legende abgewandelt worden wäre. Dieser theoretischen Forderung nachzukommen, scheint in Wirklichkeit nicht leicht zu sein. Die insgesamt fünfundneunzig in dem Leopold Kretzenbacher gewidmeten Band zusammengetragenen, kommentierten und von den Herausgebern als legendenhaft erkannten Geschichten aus ganz Europa machen das deutlich.

Neben eigentlich legendenartigen Erzählungen wie z. B. der vom Teufelsvertrag (Nr. 24 = AT 756 B) oder der vom über die Hohe See herantreibenden Heiligenbild, kontaminiert mit dem nicht weniger legendär durchdrungenen Gespannwunder (Ochsen ziehen den Wagen mit dem Heiltum zum wunderbarerweise vorbestimmten Aufstellungsort und lassen sich an keinen anderen Platz führen — Nr. 15) kommen Schwänke um Petrus oder doch schwankhafte Schilderungen dieses sich vor seinem Herrn und Gott in der volkstümlichen Überlieferung so wenig bewährenden Heiligen vor (z. B. Nr. 10, 20, 21, 43, 64, 67 — Nikolaus statt Petrus).¹ Auch der heilige Josef setzt in einer schlechthin komischen Geschichte seinen Willen im Himmel durch. Er droht, Frau und Kind mitzunehmen und das Paradies andernorts zu etablieren (Nr. 17). Dieser italienische, in Italien — wie uns die Herausgeber unterrichten — bereits 1775 von der Inquisition bekämpfte Schwank ist noch heute in den Rheinlanden in etwas umgewandelter Form geläufig. In einem Witz hat der Nährvater Christi, der ehemalige kleine Handwerker, als einziger im Himmel sozialistisch gewählt und entgeht seiner Bestrafung durch dieselbe Drohung („dann könnt ihr den Laden hier dicht machen!“). Ich erblicke im Witz und ebenso im Schwank eine gewisse anti-kirchliche Tendenz und werde hierin zumindest durch das Zeugnis von 1775 bestätigt.

¹ Zusammenfassend über Petrus: Lutz Röhrich, *Märchen und Wirklichkeit*. 2., erweiterte Auflage, Wiesbaden 1964, p. 60 f.